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ABSTRACT

References and scenes from literature that portray objectively the social elements and patterns of a culture are recommended to teach readers about typical situations and modes of behavior. This is a way of introducing the reader not only to common sociocultural patterns, but also to the cultural traits peculiar to situations that are characteristic of a place or a historic period. The content that the reader must interpret can be categorized and seen from different angles. While references to old or well-established sociocultural patterns are important, it is equally important to look at patterns that point to change in the future. Literary references to cultural aspects may concern social organization, institutions, customs, ideas, traditions, new trends, national psychology or the psychology of the different peoples of a state, manners of frequent behavior, and old and new tendencies of the language. The picture presented by the author is taken to be objective, but not necessarily neutral. When literature is used to teach language, the different uses of language should be distinguished, including the language of the author, narrator-researcher, narrator, witness, narrator-witness who is also the protagonist, narrator-researcher who has gathered and interpreted the accounts of several characters, the characters themselves, and combinations of these options. (MSE)

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Literature and Cultural Perspectives

Rafael Bosch

In determining the relationship between literature and the perspectives it offers on the cultural structures that lie at its basis, we should first of all be concerned with content, since it is evidently the main aspect of a literary work. Whenever literature approaches a level of realism, that is, whenever the social elements and patterns of a culture are objectively portrayed, references and scenes from works of literature can and should be used to make readers learn about typical situations and modes of behavior. This is a way of introducing the reader not only to the most common cases, but also to the traits which are peculiar to particular situations that are characteristic of a place or of a historical period.

The writer can, therefore, depict cultural aspects that belong universally to one society, and also deal with other elements of culture that are proper to a time or a region within that society. The first possibility generally requires a contemporary setting, in the widest sense of the term. In many developed and semi-developed societies, the contemporary forms of culture originated at the turn of the century. For other societies, the initial point could be earlier or later, depending on the amount and intensity of social changes. The important thing, however, is not just that a cultural pattern has been established in the contemporary period; this could very well be the case, but we must also take into account older forms of behavior within the given culture provided that we can show that those old patterns continue to exist today. Thus, for instance, when, in Entre naranjos ("Among the Orange Trees," 1980), Vicente Blasco Ibanez follows the ascent of a family in a rural setting, tracing the origins of a family fortune to a usurer who used to lend money to the peasants until he acquires land so that finally his son is a big landowner and a political boss, the writer gives us, among other things, a contemporary general pattern. It can be disputed if this is an aspect of culture or of society, that is, if the story has cultural or sociological implications. We believe that it has in fact both.

The term culture, in the sense that we use it today, is comparatively recent. The scientific use of the word seems to have been established in the

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late nineteenth century.[1] Culture in the sense of the way of living of a society, the customs, the ideas and attitudes that prevail in a collectivity or a human group, is an anthropological concept. But, since it consists of a descriptive exploration of society, it is clear that it shares many elements with sociology, and social organization is one of those common elements. The main difference seems to be that anthropology describes and systematizes while sociology discovers the laws of social relationships and social change.[2]

Coming back to the diverse manners in which culture can be presented in the literary work, let us add that when a writer tells us, as Benito Perez Galdos does in Torquemada en la hoguera ("Torquemada at the Gallows," 1889) that in the buildings in Madrid, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the richer people lived on the first floor, the low middle class on the second, and the poorer persons inhabited the attic, he made a general statement, which we can apply to the Spanish capital and even most other cities of that period in Spain. This is not the way the Madrilenians or other city dwellers in Spain live today. This shows that a cultural pattern can also be limited in time. It can be very characteristic of a certain period, but it does not mean that it is a pattern of social structure today. The same remark should be made about limitations in space. Thus, in El lugar de un hombre ("A Man's Place," 1939), Ramon Sender places the action of his tale in an agricultural village of Upper Aragon in 1910-25, where most peasants and farm hands vote in elections for leftist parties. That does not purport to represent the Spanish peasants of that period generally. At that time, and even much later, up to the thirties, most peasants in Spain would belong in such backward conditions that they would tend to vote for rightist parties instead in opposition to urban workers, who would tend to vote for the left. The novelist considers, in that same book, that rural society is divided between a few big landowners accompanied by several middle proprietors, on one hand, and, on the other, the poor peasants and farm hands. This must not be interpreted as a direct, universal description of agricultural Spain. In some regions, such as the south, this type of contrast would be more acute, while in the north of Castile, for instance, rich farmers would be a dominant element of the social structure. The writer means to give us a representation of some of the political and social structures of the individual society he

depicts. We must recognize similarities and differences in other regions. That does not deny the typicality of certain traits that are common to the whole of anricultural Spain, but the individual society that is presented for us here must be recognized in its concrete limitations.[3]

One of our main problems in trying to explain social patterns is how to deal with old or classical books. In those cases, we must distinguish between patterns of society that belong exclusively to the old times that are presented in the book and other patterns that reveal a permanent trait of that culture through the ages. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Cervantes, in a scene of the second part of Don Quijote, shows his protagonist challenging unknown and potential enemies and defying anybody who tries to cross a river on a bridge. The unknown enemy then materializes and it is known to be the Mesta, the terrible association of cattle raisers that ruled Spain at the time.[4] The cattle run over Don Quijote and almost kill him. This small scene that is both literal and symbolic can only take place in the Spain of the Hapsburgs and it cannot represent contemporary Spain. Cattle in a wide sense of the word, that is, including not only steers but also sheep, were the basis of the economy of imperial Spain. That economic basis collapsed during the seventeenth century. But the great book of Cervantes is full of scenes that can apply both to the writer's time and to ours. The clearest case is a portrayal of a form of social life that is common not only to Don Quijote's society and our time but also to time immemorial. This is the encounter with the simple shepherds that prompt the protagonist to deliver his famous speech about the Golden Age. While the raising of sheep and cattle as a fundamental form of social riches that has special power and privileges is confined to a very specific period--from the end of the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century--the practical work of sheep raising as a primitive form of economy comes from prehistoric times and reaches the present. The speech on the equality and humane basis of the Golden Age still retains its relevance today.

This type of reference to ways of life that originated long ago and, in direct or indirect manner, are present in contemporary life, must be brought to the attention of readers with caution. In order to relate literature and culture, we should avoid to rely on non-typical material. Good authors and

good interpreters of literature know that, in order to represent social life appropriately, they depend on a common background of interrelated structures and events, even if events may take extraordinary turns and characters may sometimes or partly be special. Old, or even very old and primitive patterns, are presented by able writers and should be analyzed by interpreters of culture in terms of their typicality. The cases may affect one scene or character, just as when Dolores Medio, in Funcionario publico ("Public Employee," 1956) tells us of a burial in Madrid today and the ceremony is completed by means of a feast. A reader who is not familiar with those rare but typical aspects of the culture may believe that he has suddenly been transported to the ancient Greek world or to a prehistoric cave. Overtones of primitive life may also create a complete frame that lies at the base of the main action of a literary work, just as it happens with some of the dramas written in the thirties by Federico García Lorca. The action takes place in the twentieth century, but peasant life, as it is portrayed in those dramas, has many elements of primitive structure and belief, even if it is presented in a state of decadence at the same time.[5]

The content materials that the reader must interpret belong in different categories and can be looked at from different angles. If reference to old or well-established patterns is extremely important, we must not underestimate the significance of patterns that point to changes in the future. When the poet, Antonio Machado, wrote in 1913 his poem "El mañana efímero" ("Ephemeral Tomorrow"), he concluded that the working masses would have a decisive intervention in future events; and when, in 1915, he wrote "Una España joven" ("A Spain of the Young People"), he started by summarizing the failures of his generation of intellectuals and then he announced that the next generation would make greater efforts and succeed in greater social achievements; then, in such poems, the writer expressed the origin of the changes that would impel the Spanish population to new and decisive actions from 1917 on and that would succeed in the late twenties and early thirties. An important aspect of this question is that an author needs not be completely explicit in that respect. What is essential is that he, or she, recognizes the trend that points out to the future, even when this is not actively emphasized or clearly recognized at the outset.[6]

More has to be said about the content materials, its categories and angles taken to look at them. The literary reference to cultural aspects may concern social organization, institutions, customs, ideas, traditions, new trends, national psychology or the psychology of the different peoples of a state (ethnopsychology), manners of frequent behavior, tendencies of the language, both old and new. We have said that the picture of a culture that an author offers us must be objective. And, in order to be objective, the reflection of the realities portrayed does not have to be neutral, among other things because that neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Writers, as well as other human beings, have their own ideas and beliefs, and an attempt at hiding them substantially from us readers can only result in an unpleasant form of hypocrisy. The writer has the obligation to be prudent in order to avoid a situation in which the approval or disapproval of the reader depends on his coincidence or discrepancy with the author's beliefs. But, besides being prudent, the author is not required to be hypocritical: he must be sincere and outspoken. Yet it is better if he makes those opinions as implicit as possible, because our judgment must be not so much a judgment of his ideas as of the reality portrayed. If the facts are credible by themselves, if the characters stand on their own and are not just the author's capricious creatures, whose only law is the mind of their creator, then we can say that there is objectivity in the portrayal, and the explicit ideas manifested by the author will occupy a secondary place. In realistic writers, this objectivity is applied to the substance of the content; but, of course, in terms of the methods of presentation of that material, or in terms not just of representation but of expression, the writer always uses and it is good that he uses many subjective ways of approach. Great writers create such methods of approaching human subjectivity. Therefore, a real objectivity has to be a combination of objective and subjective factors.

Our position, therefore is that representation must be objective in the sense that its data can be checked against other data, but that expression can be subjective in a number of ways, such as expressive distortion by exaggeration or by new modes of exploration of human subjectivity. That growth of exploration of subjectivity is naturally a tendency in the way of progress of the knowledge of the human mind, since, in order to effectively

function in society, we must probe into the minds of others. It is a very special pursuit of literature because literature, just as the other forms of art, tries to go deep into the thoughts, feelings and motives of individuals and groups. This must be done, of course, by means of creative, or combinatory, imagination. Other forms of the human exploration of truth, such as history or philosophy, certainly aim at presenting thoughts and motives, but they mainly depend on the development of external circumstances. Art and literature follow a peculiar road to reach the most intimate secrets of the human mind and heart. But an exclusive dependence on the subjective factors of human life destroy the objectivity of artistic vision. Thus, for instance, a few great novelists of the nineteenth century created the special perspective of the internal monologue, among other devices to accent subjectivity to an unprecedented degree in that period. Lev Tolstoy created the internal monologue in some of his youthful short stories of the fifties, and Nikolay Chernishevsky created the concept and the term, which he discussed at length and ably defined in a famous essay.[7] Benito Perez Galdos created the internal monologue in the grammatical first person in 1881.[8] At the turn of the century, a few writers started to abuse the device in such a manner that, finally, in 1922, James Joyce wrote an entire and very long book, Ulysses, in a series of exclusive internal monologues, thus preventing any objective judgment of his action and characters, and since then the number of his imitators, usually second or third rate, who use the device just as routine, has been infinite.

When the author succeeds in reaching an ultimate objective position, we must nevertheless compare the autonomous reality he, or she, portrays to the attitude the writer takes in presenting that material. Explicitly sometimes, but at least always implicitly, the writer has a reason to present those materials which contain cultural patterns. He, or she, made a choice and looks at the subject matter in an individual manner. There is always a dialectical relationship, at least implicit, in those choices of whole scenes and details, with reference to the author's motives, as well as the manner in which he, or she, presents those materials to the reader. In brief, in the literary work there is a vista but also a vision, a material contemplated and a manner of contemplation of it, and both are closely interrelated. Those

choices and visions of the writer (the elements of his manner of looking at his material) also betray cultural patterns--they are not the exclusive property of the content. Cultural patterns are present in the content and in the vision of it, even if--in the latter case--they are not always openly declared. In our task of making people understand or recognize cultural patterns that have been transmitted by the literary work, this aspect of the manner of looking at the material is first of all extremely significant and then it has to be compared to and integrated with that material, which only then is totally understood.

Let us see some examples. When the great seventeenth century dramatist, Lope de Vega, presents in his tragedy El alcalde de Zalamea ("The Judge of Zalamea") the case of a farmer who strongly resents the lodging of army officers and troops in the houses of the villagers, he reflects a conflict that was very real and has been dealt with by other coëval authors.[9] But, at the same time, he makes a particular choice of characters and details of the action. His Pedro Crespo first appears as a country bumpkin. It is only later, in the course of the action, that he discloses his determination and clarity of vision that makes his greatness. When Calderon subsequently imitated Lope's creation in his own drama of the same name, his rustic man has nothing clumsy or funny about him. The atmosphere and plot being basically the same in both plays, this difference in details and elements of character are very eloquent in each case. Lope, the original creator of the protagonist and his conflict and actions, has endowed his main character with elements of vulgarity and comicity because he evidently wishes to emphasize the social class distance between the peasant and the captain or captains, and he does so in order to make the villager's rebellion stronger. Calderon changes a number of details, beginning with the traits of his Pedro Crespo, because, within his own individual perspective, the essence of the conflict lies not so much in rebellion as in the defense of one's own dignity against the offenses of the privileged classes. There is a solution through violence in both dramas, but Lope accentuates revenge--or the redress of justice--while Calderon emphasizes the struggle for the defense of rights. This does not only teach us about the attitudes of different social groups--Lope belonging to the petty bourgeoisie and Calderon to the petty bureaucratic nobility--as well as individual

differences in the two writers, but also about the manner in which each author handles his material. We must define the coëval attitudes not only of individuals but of social groups, which is one of the tasks of cultural anthropology, and then we must study how these conditioning factors influenced the handling of the subject matter. On the other hand, all of those factors, in turn, influence the subject matter, and especially the plot. In the two dramas we are referring to, both actions coincide in presenting an offended peasant, or farmer, who, when favored by fortune in being elected to the position of the judge of his village, takes advantage of the situation in order to punish his offenders. This story is sure to appear strange and even repugnant to the members of several cultures other than the Spanish or Hispanic. But the drama is famous because in the minds of the Spanish--and Hispanic--public, the protagonist is not a violator of the law but an ardent advocate of justice. This is in itself a lesson in the diversity of cultural experience, or in the peculiarity of the culture that produced such an expression of itself.[10] The variations in the two versions of the plot include the following: Lope's Pedro Crespo has two daughters who live in concubinage with two captains; Calderón's Pedro Crespo has one daughter who is raped by a captain; when he is elected judge, Calderon's hero requests the captain to marry his daughter, and when he refuses, Crespo orders his execution; Lope's protagonist, as soon as he sees himself in power, arrests both captains, forces them to marry his daughters, and then he has both executed without the slightest hesitation. The different perspectives of each author, even if they coincide in their basic attitudes, can be seen in the contrasts we have just pointed out.

If such contradictions exist between material and perspective in realistic writers, the element of perspective, or vision, is still more important in unrealistic or not-so-realistic authors. Realism requires the balance between objective and subjective factors that we have considered before. A tendency prevails today in criticism to regard realism only as a historical school or group of schools. It would seem that authors are only realistic when they have, in recent modern times, theorized on art or literature as a reflection of social life and on the methods to achieve an accurate depiction of it. This is, in our view, a very narrow and irrational conception. An author is

realistic not because he has produced or assimilated a series of theories, but because he, or she, has explored vast realms of reality, both material and psychological. This concept can be supplied to Homer and to Balzac, to Aeschylus and to Shakespeare, to Dante and to Shelley. It is indifferent in that respect that they directly represent the society of their times, like Dickens, or that they invent unknown islands and fantastic characters and actions, as Shakespeare does in The Tempest.[11] The decisive thing is that ultimately they are representing reality objectively, in a manner that can be analyzed and judged. Even non-material fantasy can play a role in that condition of objectivity. But when the writer uses "idle imagination," as Chernishevsky called it, when fantasy is useless and cannot represent reality, no matter by which means, and it evokes only images that are absolutely subjective,[12] then literature becomes anti-realistic. Or when we are given no measure by which to assess the objective meaning of a reality that is supposed to exist, then literature also becomes unrealistic, and thus it is anti-realistic. We believe that, in fact, it becomes a terribly irresponsible sort of literature, something like an anti-literature. In such cases, within the trends that prevail today, it is difficult to say that cultural perspectives are present there. But they are, even if they exist in the manner of the omnipotent mind of the author.

When we are obliged to criticize a phenomenon negatively, such as the material content of a literary work, and it is evident that in such a case we cannot derive any knowledge of a reality that has been falsified or misrepresented, there is still the possibility and the duty to study the vision of reality offered by the anti-realistic author so as to derive conclusions on the cultural attitudes that he artificially superimposes on his material. When a novelist such as Camilo Jose Cela, in his book, La familia de Pascual Duarte ("The Family of Pascual Duarte," 1942), attributes to his protagonist a series of mechanical demonstrations of brutality on the basis that he had been one of the victims of a strongly unjust situation, we refuse to consider this interpretation of violence in contemporary Spain, including the Civil War, as satisfactory. Yet, similar explanations have been produced by exponents of Spanish culture sometimes, and studying the misconceptions of the author is also a task of clarifying cultural attitudes and patterns.

Finally, we wish to propose a few concepts about the relationship between literature and language as a cultural phenomenon. Language appears in literary works as a general basis of communication. And, within that frame, it appears as the language of the author or the narrator, who can be a witness of the events, and as reported speech. Since literature can and should be employed, among other uses, in the acquisition and improvement of language abilities, the distinction among these different means of using language is most pertinent in the effort to relate literature and cultural perspectives. In literary works, we ought to distinguish the following types of language:

1. The language of the author.

2. The language of a narrator-researcher who discovered documents and reproduces and perhaps analyzes them.

3. The language of a narrator-witness.

4. The language of a narrator-witness who, at the same time, is a protagonist.

5. The language of a narrator-researcher who has gathered together and interpreted several accounts provided by a number of characters.

6. The language of the characters.

7. A combination of several of the above options.

This, of course, applies to narrative literature, that is, to the novel and short story and other assimilated or similar forms. But the problem of classification would be easier in the drama, although perhaps more difficult in lyric poetry.

In any case, we must start with such categories of literary language so as to productively relate literature and language as an ability. An objective author, who remains semi-anonymous, without identifying himself and without intervening in the action, speaks a different type of language in comparison to a narrator-witness or a character, and individual characters speak different languages in terms of their social background and development and individual tendencies. By the same token, written language and oral language differ from one another. We must take into account all of those differences in order to learn and practice language through literature. Since language is the fundamental means of the literary arts, this is indeed one of the most crucial questions of the relationship between literature and cultural

perspectives. The manners in the use of language by the author have to be related to the cultural patterns resulting from that diversity of manners and intentions.

Emphasizing and analyzing the interrelation between literature and cultural perspectives does not mean that this method for the study of literature and language is the only possible method, but we are convinced that it is a very important and fundamental part of the proper understanding of those subjects.

NOTES

1. Probably the earliest use of the word in the sense referred to here was made by E. B. Taylor.

2. This methodological distinction should be applied to the other objects that cultural anthropology and sociology have in common.

3. That does not mean that the author has not thought about the action and atmosphere of his novel as something typically Spanish and which reaches a larger scope than his village in Huesca. It is quite evident that he expects the reader to derive lessons about Spain in general, by means of a manner of generalization that is typical and also symbolic. But the world he depicts to reach those ampler conclusions is very definitely limited.

4. The Mesta, or association of sheep and steer raisers, was dominated by the aristocracy (the grandees of Castille) and it was first recognized in an official manner by the kings of Castille and the laws in the thirteenth century.

5. It is for that reason indeed that one of those dramas, the tragedy, Bodas de sangre ("Bloody Wedding," 1933--strangely translated under the title, "Bitter Oleander") has been successfully adapted in two film versions which emphasized its primitive character, one Greek and even one Moroccan.

6. Thus, for instance, Gyorgy Lukacs has noted that the ending of Tolstoy's War and Peace is a clear indication that Russian society will change strongly after the Napoleonic invasion, as the emergence of the Decembists and other revolutionaries historically showed. Yet, there is no explicit discussion of that subject in the novel.

7. See R. Matlaw, editor, Belinsky, Chernishevsky and Debrolyubov, New York 1962, p. 95 ss.

8. We are referring to La desheredada, which opens with the internal monologue, in the first grammatical person, of an unknown man, who--as we later learn--is a madman. In the rest of the action, we follow a series of internal monologues of the same type in relation to his daughter, who is the progatonist and suffers from delusions of grandeur.

9. For instance, Mateo Aleman in his novel, Guzman de Alfarache.

10. Peculiarity does not mean uniqueness. Calderon and his Judge of Zalamea have been, for example, extremely successful in Germany since the 19th century.

11. In such cases, fantasy is handled in a non-material manner. Literary and artistic imagination always requires material imagination, that presents events that are justified by our material experience of life. But we can use non-material imagination to represent the same realities in a symbolic manner. When non-material imagination ceases to have that justification, it becomes idle.

12. Attitudes can be absolutely subjective by not presenting any discrepancy of elements that permit the reader to judge about circumstances presented subjectively. In order to be objective, we must ultimately compare testimonies and visions of reality.